

Lt. Gov. tells Pajaro Valley it needs to work together to solve water woes

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WATSONVILLE -- Farmers and urban dwellers should work together to come up with a solution to the water crisis in the Pajaro Valley through conservation, recycling and other water-saving approaches, according to the state's second in command.

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, who spoke Wednesday night before more than 100 people at the fourth in a series of water forums convened by the city of Watsonville and the beleaguered Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, said people should do everything in their power to use the latest water-saving techniques while trying to retain local control of their groundwater.

One thing they shouldn't do, he said, is count on water from the Sacramento River, which is already in high demand and has been considered by the water agency.

"Overdraft is going to continue, but you must resolve the issue," Garamendi told the audience of farmers and city folks. "It's really in your hands. If you find a common ground, you're going to find a solution."

In a short speech that many saw as a pep talk, Garamendi said there are all sorts of ways to save water, from farmers using different irrigation techniques to the city promoting low-flow toilets, perhaps even giving them out for free -- something Los Angeles did recently to help shore up its water woes.

Garamendi's appearance comes at a critical juncture in the history of the Pajaro Valley: The quality of water is declining for coastal farmers due to the intrusion of saltwater from the ocean. Plus, the Pajaro Valley water agency, in charge of managing the aquifers, has laid off half of its staff and is down to eight thanks to losing a years-long lawsuit and millions of dollars.

The agency was sued by a handful of farmers who challenged the legality of the agency raising water fees during the past decade to help pay for some of the multimillion-dollar water solutions. Among those were the construction of a freshwater import pipeline from the Central Valley to the Pajaro Valley that would have increased water supply.

The crux of the problem is something that's playing out in much of California. As cities grow, more water is needed and overdrafting occurs, leading to an intrusion of sea water into local wells. The result is that agriculture suffers, and many growers end up selling their land to developers.